

THE SPIRITUAL TASK OF RELIGION IN CULTURE: AN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

by Philip Hefner

Abstract. It is quite impossible to consider human nature within an evolutionary perspective if we leapfrog over culture and establish some direct relation between cosmic and human evolution without taking culture into consideration. Culture holds a significant place within the structures of nature, as the “epic” of evolution portrays nature—cosmic, physical, and biological. Religion emerges within culture, and it plays a role in organizing the human consciousness and in generating the stories, rituals, and morality that constitute the organization of consciousness. Since organization of consciousness determines how culture is conducted, and since we face a global crisis today because of the ways we are conducting our culture, religion’s role is critical for the future of culture. Wherever it is attempted, whether in terms of traditional or posttraditional modes, the fashioning of adequate worldviews, rituals, and morality is an essentially religious activity. For both traditional and posttraditional modes, the task is to weave structures of meaning with the sciences of evolution so as to effect the most suitable organization of consciousness.

Keywords: culture; epic of evolution; organization of consciousness; religion; stories.

WHAT IS CULTURE? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

We frequently use terms such as “high culture and low culture,” “women’s culture,” and “African American culture.” I am speaking of culture in a different way. Let me explain. We humans are fundamentally dependent upon information for our existence. Without two basic kinds of information, we would not even be here on this planet. The first is *genetic information*, the information carried in our DNA, which provides for the

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making of proteins that in turn determine the shapes of our noses, the color of our eyes, the formation of our internal organs, and all our other physical characteristics. Genetic information is not all that makes us who we are, but it is everywhere in our bodies. Within this model of information, DNA has been likened to a library of construction manuals inside every cell of our bodies.

The second kind of information on which we are dependent is *cultural information*. Genes alone do not a human being make. It is genetic information that directs the fertilizing of an egg and the nourishing of the growing embryo and fetus until a baby is born. But it is another kind of information that determines how that baby is conceived—whether planned or not, by in vitro fertilization, by egg or embryo transplant, or by surrogate motherhood. It is another type of information that makes prenatal care possible for mother and child. That information is cultural, and by that we mean that this information is not a programmed input that comes with its own operating instructions; it is learned and taught individually. A lot of learning and teaching go into engaging in safe sex or transplanting an embryo. There would be no hospitals or birthing centers apart from much learning and teaching. And the newborn baby who goes home from the hospital does not survive unless a great deal about nurturing and caring for infants has somehow been learned and taught. This learning and teaching we call “culture.” There is a difference between a calf’s being born in the barnyard, struggling within a few minutes to get to its feet and amble up to its mother, and the birth of a human baby, who requires expert care and assistance as she or he learns within the first year of life to walk. The difference is that humans are creatures of culture in ways and to a degree that cattle are not. From the moment we awaken in the morning to an alarm clock or a radio, decide whether to eat a low-fat, high-fiber breakfast or toaster pastry and doughnuts, jump into a car or take a train to work, we live in utter dependence upon cultural information. We hope that the learning and teaching have taken hold well enough that when we flip the switch, the lights go on, and when we turn the faucet, water comes out. It is culture that has reshaped our landscapes and built our cities.

In one sense of the word, culture is what takes place in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s new Symphony Center a few miles north of the *Zygon* editorial office. In another sense, the sense I am using here, culture is also what brought us here this afternoon, and culture is what happening between us right now, as we assemble and communicate and reflect afterwards on what has happened.

STORIES AND CULTURE

The calf and its mother do not have to understand, consciously, very much about the process of a calf’s birth and its ungainly attempts at

walking. The human mother and father, the nurse, the midwife, and the physician have to be aware of much more. Culture has to be constructed, and—strangely and marvelously—it has to be surrounded by embellishing stories. It takes a great deal of story construction and storytelling to sustain safe sex. It takes even more to sustain in vitro fertilization—and there are large segments of our society that condemn IVF as unnatural; they have counterstories that say this cultural development should not be taking place. The lucrative IVF clinics of our major hospitals are depending on a totally different set of stories to clarify and support their work.

Or take house building. Birds build nests, for example, much more on the basis of genetic inputs, and less of learning from one another, it seems, so we tend to say that they do it by instinct. We humans *learn* how to build our houses, and we *teach* what we have learned. It's a dynamic process because house construction is always changing—to make use of new materials and designs. Furthermore, we seem to have to explain and justify our house building; hence the rather powerful stories we tell. We used to say that “a man's home is his castle,” and we backed that up by allowing home owners to shoot intruders, in self-defense, within their castles. We speak nowadays about home ownership as the right of every person, but we say that the American Dream is fading because houses are too expensive for many young persons to buy. Does the bird have a sense of a nest as “every robin's right?” Does a robin need to? Why do we humans need to tell stories to explain and justify our culture? Is it because we cannot reasonably supply all persons with their own houses? Why should owning a house be more desirable than renting an apartment? The answers to these questions lead to interesting and important understandings of how and why we put our systems of cultural information together as we do. The answers also reveal that different societies construct their cultures on the basis of differing stories.

THE CHALLENGE OF CULTURE

Culture, in the light of what I have just said, requires a certain amount of self-awareness and decision making. Buildings such as the one we are in did not just happen; they are end products of much planning and decision making. The same can be said of the processes of in vitro fertilization and the existence of neonatal clinics. Construction of the cultural systems that our lives depend on requires a certain freedom—defined as the obligation to make decisions.

Today, virtually all of the major crises that confront us are crises of culture. That is why I speak of culture as a *challenge*. Global warming, environmental abuse, doubts about our proper relationship to the rest of life on the planet, inadequate schools, confusion concerning proper family

life, poverty, violence in the streets, conflict between ethnic groups, confusion in the application of reproductive technologies—these are all rooted in our inability to construct and conduct adequate systems of cultural information. We do not know how to build an economy based on full employment and fair distribution of wealth that can at the same time live in a wholesome relationship with our natural environment. We are culturally incompetent in these areas and also in others.

Such incompetence in our culture is potentially lethal. Our culture, in the form of technology, has been responsible for the great population increase on our planet. Not only was technology essential for the emergence of the present population size; it is now a necessity for maintaining it, if the people are to survive. Cultural incompetence, then, cannot be tolerated with indifference as if it were simply inherent human fallibility, because the incompetence reduces life chances for large segments of society, and it threatens *all* of the human population, directly or indirectly. We live in the first era of human evolution in which culture and population exist in this complex interrelationship on a planetary scale. Before this time, errors of conduct in our culture were less critical on the planetary, specieswide scale.

The challenge of culture, in the critical moment in which we now live, is a chapter in the epic of evolution, because it is in the process of biological evolution that culture has emerged as a fundamental element of human life. Culture is a natural phenomenon, an evolutionary phenomenon, and the crises we presently face are crises of nature and evolution. The culture-embracing stories that I spoke of, explaining and justifying our culture, are also part of the evolutionary epic. We are searching mightily today for adequate stories and new forms that will enable us to meet the challenge of culture in our day. Because this very journal, as a matter of fact, is part of that search, we must also say that publications like this are part of the epic of evolution.

CULTURE AND NATURE

There is no dualism between culture and nature except perhaps at the level of surface appearance; that is why we speak of *biocultural evolution*. When I say this, I recognize fully that I am flying in the face of a fundamental strand of our Western traditions that holds nature and culture, nature and human spirit, nature and human persons, to be two separate realms—the well-known spirit-nature dualism that has haunted us at least since Plato's creation story in the *Timaeus*, in which he asserted that the deficiencies of matter successfully thwarted God's intention to create the kind of world that God really wanted. The testimony of contemporary scientific research rejects such dualism because we know that our culture, which is also the seat of the human spirit, has emerged within biological

evolution, in the wake of the formation of the human central nervous system.

Culture, therefore, is a happening within nature. Culture belongs to nature. It is, in a metaphorical sense, nature's organ. If we bring into play what I have said about culture, then we must conclude that culture is nature's own process of being self-aware—of being aware of itself, of trying to understand itself and its world—and of trying to discharge fundamental processes of evolution under the condition of free choice and decision making. There have been articulations of this understanding in our recent past: the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, in "Ribblesdale" ([1882] 1967, 90–91), spoke of humans as the "eye, ear, tongue" of nature; Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (like Hopkins, a Jesuit) referred to the human species as "evolution become aware of itself" (1965, 182); cosmologist John Wheeler hinted at the essential feature of cosmic evolution as the emergence of the universe viewing itself (1977); medical writer Lewis Thomas developed an image of humans as "a sort of sense-organ" for planet earth (1984, 36); Thomas Berry suggests that we are the dream of the earth (1988); Berry and Brian Swimme speak of us as the "eyes of the Milky Way looking at itself" (1992). The dynamics and significance of the current discussion of the epic of evolution are misjudged if we do not see that we, in these very days, exemplify nature's attempt to understand itself.

CULTURE AND THE ORGANIZATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS

I summarize the discussion to this point by calling attention to two ideas that are fundamental: (1) that it is quite impossible to consider the epic of evolution and the nature of human persons by attempting to leapfrog over culture and establish some direct relation between cosmic and biological evolution without taking culture into consideration; and (2) that culture holds an incredibly significant place within the structures of nature, as the epic of evolution portrays nature—cosmic, physical, and biological.

What, then, is the central human issue of culture, viewed scientifically, within the epic of evolution? It is the issue of what some psychologists, such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1991), call the *organization of our consciousness*. This is another way of saying that the central issue is, What should guide us in the construction and conduct of our culture? The values we espouse, the worldviews we hold, the decisions we make, all flow from the ways in which our consciousness is organized. In scientific terms, it is the psychological dimension of our personality that plays the role of gatekeeper between our genetic and cultural inputs, on the one hand, and what we shall select to pay most attention to and therefore act upon, on the other hand (Csikszentmihalyi and Massimini 1995). This gatekeeper function and decision making rest on the foundation of how consciousness is organized.

It is how our consciousness is organized that tells us whether animals are fellow creatures—or just meat on the hoof or producers of milk and eggs. We act on the basis of this organization. It is the organization of our consciousness that tells us whether ancient forests are so many board feet of lumber or rolls of newsprint—or whether they are to be respected and preserved as natural treasures. It is how our consciousness is organized that tells us whether women and men are equal or not, whether persons of a different skin color are second-class citizens, whether persons are to be more highly valued if they produce and consume more goods than if they do not. Another word for organization of consciousness may be what is now widely referred to, both within religious circles and outside them, in the term *spirituality*.

I am here merely rephrasing Csikszentmihalyi's discussion of spirituality (1991) as constituted by *memes*, the cultural counterpart to genes,¹ which take our genetic evolution into account but "at the same time point to possibilities to which our biological inheritance is not yet sensitive." Spirituality is not some supernaturally oriented package of ideas; it is a close-to-the-ground perspective that is deeply immersed in the particularities of our evolving world but focuses on what those particularities *can become*. This is the most important component for organizing our consciousness, our focus on what these very natural bodies and brains, in this most natural world, *can become*.

Roger Sperry (1983), a Nobel laureate in brain research, gave expression to this insight when he said that the most powerful thing in the world is not the nuclear armaments of the nations; it is rather the *values* that inhabit the minds of those whose hands are on the switches that release those armaments. Those values, which image so concretely what the minds believe the world can become, are the centers of power. He might have said that the ways in which the consciousness of those minds is organized is the key factor, because it determines how the nuclear warheads will be employed.

RELIGION IN THE EPIC OF EVOLUTION

Culture is where religion happens; religion is located within human culture. Religion has emerged within the cultural phase of evolution. What does religion do—what is it for?—in the cultural realm? It is a primary force for the organization of consciousness and therefore for the world-views and values and decisions that drive culture. Religion is above all concerned with what the natural world can become—its possibilities. Religion's adaptive success in strengthening individual psyches and mobilizing group spirit flows from its vision of what the world can become. You will note that with these words I am accounting for the place of religion and its function in terms of evolution.

This evolutionary interpretation leads us to say that religion too is an information system within culture. Religion is one of those elements in our culture that carries the information that constructs our culture, and it bears core information for culture.

The characteristics we associate with religion all have to do with the effort of nature to understand itself and conduct itself in freedom to make the choices that sustain evolution in the deepest sense. The myths and doctrines of religion are the stories we have referred to; they try to embrace our culture, explain it, and justify it. The rituals set forth how the stories might shape our lives. The moral codes are literal attempts to shape our daily living. Myths, doctrines, rituals, moral codes—these are not above nature or even alongside it; these are emergent forms that nature itself takes in its effort to understand nature's own meaning, including the meaning of human nature.

In order to play its role, religion must generate the stories, rituals, and moral codes of meaning, on the basis of its heritage but in the currency of the present moment. To invoke the genetic metaphor, our genome is a heritage that we bring with us into the present, but the organism that carries that heritage will die unless it successfully negotiates a passage into the next generation. That is what the term *inclusive fitness* means. Negotiating meaning in the present time—that is at the heart of religion's task. Or we might say that organizing consciousness in *viable* ways for passage into the next generation is religion's contribution to the epic of evolution. Since spirituality is another term for this, we can call this the *spiritual challenge* of our phase of the evolutionary epic.

It amounts to this: *In every era and in every situation, religion seeks to serve nature's self-understanding and thereby to serve the conduct of culture in ways that will negotiate the rapids of evolution's future.* And as the eye, ear, tongue, and dream of nature, we must develop for ourselves the criteria of what adequate negotiation of the future amounts to. Among both traditional religionists and posttraditionalists, there can be much bad, demonic religion that must be rejected in favor of good religion—and we are the ones who must determine what “good” and “bad” mean.

All persons face this religious challenge; it is a challenge that is central to the survival of all persons and all particular cultures, even as it is decisive for the future of the planet, although we do not know what that future is.

Many persons share in this religious dimension of nature's evolution as members of traditional religious communities—Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, adherents to primordial religions. Even restricted to the population of the city of Chicago, for example, the religious affiliations are too numerous to catalogue. For these persons, the traditions of their religious communities are the chief resource

for organizing consciousness, their main entrée to spirituality for our times.

Those persons who believe in God will hold that God gave religion to the human race, and gave revelations to the religions for precisely this purpose, that the most viable organizations of consciousness might take place so as to enable the future of God's plans for the evolutionary creation.

All of these religious folk, however, face the incredible task of rendering their tradition for the evolutionary rigors of the present time, looking forward to future generations. Since those traditions have been transmitted to our time in forms that were adaptive for culture's basic information in previous situations, which are vastly different from those in our present context, and since we face a crisis of culture that is almost incomprehensibly deep and broad, the task facing the traditional religions is staggering. Nevertheless, religious persons are committed to the hard path that lies ahead for them: transforming their traditions from the past into forms that are life-giving for our transition into the future.

There are many others, however, who believe that traditional religions have run their course, that they have come to the "end of their string," and are incapable of meeting the spiritual challenge of the present moment in the epic of evolution. These persons are equally dedicated to the hard path of spirituality. *These persons, no less than the traditional religionists, are engaged in the religious dimension of human culture*, namely, the formation of the worldviews and values, and the making of decisions for culture, that are adequate for the future. These persons seek alternative frameworks of meaning, new stories and rituals. In fact, the theme of this conference, the epic of evolution, suggests an image that is new and is a prime candidate to become the creation story for this era of the epic.

This second group may well be more aware of the need for viable new forms of spirituality, and in this sense their sensibilities are ahead of those of the traditionalists. In a way, however, members of this group face perhaps the much more difficult task of starting from scratch: constructing the stories, the rituals, and the moral codes that are essential to the organization of consciousness for the phase of culture that we live in today. Some of these persons are also involved in weaving together traditions from many religions in an effort to construct new expressions of spirituality. In their declarations of willingness to start afresh, this group manifests a special kind of courage.

Both of these groups of people—the traditional religionists and the posttraditional religionists—are caught up in the challenge of the epic of evolution, which is also the challenge of this conference: *to learn the most life-giving organization of consciousness and discern the most adequate spirituality* for this phase of evolution on the planet. This opens up one of the

most urgent and exciting frontiers that we can observe just now—the *evolution of consciousness* itself. The elements that belong together form a triad: cultural evolution, evolution of consciousness, and religion.

I like to speak of this moment in our evolutionary history and its challenges in terms of weaving. We are, all of us, weavers. The weaver constructs the warp, anchoring it to the loom, and then, by working the weft in and through the warp, creates patterns that make up the entire tapestry. The epic of evolution, in the form that scientists present in their research papers, is the warp on which all present and future meaning for our lives must be woven. Every one of us and every group represented here seeks, within the terms of its own philosophy of life, to weave its spirituality within the epic of evolution. We all seek to organize our consciousness through our weaving in ways that can serve our information function within culture. There is no single correct way in which the weaving will take shape, no single authorized manner in which the epic must appear in our worldviews. The person who finds traditional wisdom still meaningful will weave with that tradition in mind, while the posttraditionalists will seek to weave their characteristic visions. All of the various weavers of meaning will find a commonality in the scientific warp and in the cultural crisis that faces us all, and each will learn from how others negotiate their visions within the warp's constraints and possibilities. Each weaver will discover resources in the visions of all that went unappreciated before, and each will find that some precious presuppositions just do not fit.

This is what we are here for, we humans who are the cultural religious animals of evolution on our planet. We are here to interweave the life-giving spiritualities—the consciousness—for our phase of the epic of evolution and for the next generation.

NOTE

1. The term *meme* is increasingly being used as cultural counterpart to the term *gene*, as a unit of information. There is no consensus concerning the viability of the concept of the meme or on its definition. I use it as a heuristic image, to emphasize that culture is itself a system of information that requires attention in its own right, not as an epiphenomenal adjunct of physical and biological information.

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